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# A comparative look at a centenary. A review of World War I commemorative events in Brussels

BSI synopsis

*Regards croisés sur un Centenaire. Un premier bilan des commémorations de la Première Guerre mondiale à Bruxelles*

*Gekruiste blikken op een honderdste verjaardag. Een eerste balans van de herdenkingen van de Eerste Wereldoorlog in Brussel*

**Serge Jaumain, Joost Vaesen, Bruno Benvindo, Pierre Bouchat, Eric Bousmar, Iadine Degryse, Chantal Kesteloot, Olivier Klein and Karla Vanraepenbusch**

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Serge Jaumain and Joost Vaesen coordinated this synopsis and finalised the writing.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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## Introduction

- 1 Since the end of World War II, there has never been as much talk of the *Great War*, which had been overshadowed for so long by World War II in the historiography and collective memory [Benvindo, Majerus en Vrints, 2014]. The centenary has led to many publications and academic activities, as well as a large number of events of all types intended for a broad public.
- 2 In the history of major commemorative events, they will probably be considered as a turning point not only due to their scope (global), but above all to the role given to the general public. Traditionally invited to attend slightly formal ceremonies and to “receive” the fruit of work carried out by others (publications, exhibits, radio and television programmes, guided tours, etc.), this time they were invited to “immerse themselves” in World War I. Spectators often became the actors and co-producers of their own history. Many activities organised in the framework of the commemorative events have thus sought to capture audiences in order to “lead them” into the past and make them “feel” the reality of the time and learn something about history, and especially about contemporary society. In short, it is a form of teaching which seeks out emotions and – although it is not entirely new [Benvindo and Peeters, 2011] – has captured the attention of a very broad public.
- 3 Brussels has not escaped from this vast movement. Just over three years after the beginning of the commemorative events, a first retrospective analysis of activities organised in the capital may be attempted, while focusing more specifically on their themes, organisers, financing and “impact” on the general public. This is the object of the second synopsis on World War I published by *Brussels Studies*.
- 4 In order to truly understand the particularities of activities organised in the Brussels-Capital Region, they must first be considered in the institutional context of a federal Belgium where the commemorative events have been the object of competition between different levels of authority.

## 1. The commemorative events in federal Belgium

- 5 Well before 2014, it was clear that there would be commemorative events on an unprecedented scale [Jeanneney, 2013]. As it was at the heart of World War I, Belgium had to play a special role, and the public authorities had to orchestrate a large part of the events. Their action was, however, deeply influenced by the federal structure of a state where the main powers which can be mobilised for such events (culture, tourism, research, education) depend above all on the Regions and Communities. Although the commemorative events summon up a shared past, it soon became apparent that, without

any actual coordination, they would break down into a multitude of activities created by each federated entity with a will to use their powers to reinforce their legitimacy and their visibility [Lefevre, 2013]. The institutional structure of the country thus created unheard of competition in terms of the management of historical memory, as the Belgian federal authorities no longer have the power to impose a global coordination of events.

- 6 Ahead of everyone, Flanders began to prepare its own commemorative events in 2006 [Van Alstein, 2011], investing considerable financial means which could not leave the other federated entities feeling indifferent. The Flemish authorities asserted their intentions straight away: the centenary had to boost the tourism sector (or “historical memory tourism”) in Flanders and reinforce the international visibility of the Region while conveying a message of peace and reconciliation on a global scale [Bost and Kesteloot, 2014: 27]. As most of the battles took place in the Flemish territory, the authorities decided to create a “World War I product” based on three pillars: attractions (exhibits, museums, etc.), the promotion of historical memory sites and the organisation of events [Kesteloot and Van Ypersele, 2016: 220]. However, their investments were marked by two significant particularities: a concentration in the very small area of the territory (Westhoek) where most of the battles took place (and therefore where the remains of the front are located), and the low level of participation of the academic community, which complained strongly of being kept out of the steering committee and the first strategic choices of the Flemish government [Wouters, 2012 and 2014b; Havaux, 2013; Leenknecht, 2014].
- 7 The dynamics initiated by Flanders combined with its initial will to ignore the Belgian dimension of the conflict [Wouters, 2016: 78] led the other levels of authority, including the federal state, to follow suit.
- 8 In the French-speaking part of the country, as of 2010, the *Conseil de la transmission de la mémoire* (council for the passing on of memory) questioned the government of the French Community. A working group then worked out a plan of action for the commemorative events. It was presented to the governments of the French Community and the Walloon Region, which had chosen to work together. This plan favoured a global view of the conflict in order to underline – alongside the military aspects – the experience of civilians who lived in the occupied territory. As in Flanders, there was very much a will to protect heritage and develop “historical memory tourism”, but in this case, there was more of an emphasis on life in the country as a whole rather than on the experience on the front. The project paid special attention to the passing on of the memory of war and, unlike the Flemish experience, it was supported by academics, as the steering committee was chaired by a historian from *Université catholique de Louvain*, Laurence Van Ypersele.<sup>1</sup>
- 9 As a sign of the times, the federal state took the decision to intervene in this case only in the summer of 2011, i.e. after the two main communities and with relatively modest objectives. A first steering committee was set up in November 2011. Its president, Paul Breyne (a politician labelled CD&V who ended his career as the governor of the province of West Flanders), was officially appointed Commissioner General in charge of World War I commemoration in March 2012. In addition to chairing the steering committee, he was responsible for ensuring the dialogue between all of the stakeholders at federal level and with the communities, regions, provinces and municipalities. A platform for dialogue allowed them to learn about each other's initiatives. The Commissioner General was also invited to follow the working groups which organised the national ceremonies and the multiannual programme of activities. Finally, it was the official contact point with the

other countries. An academic advisory committee composed of historians was also set up to advise the steering committee and preselect the projects submitted in the framework of federal calls. In total, the federal authority financed the organisation of three major official ceremonies and, via the *Loterie Nationale*, two calls for projects costing one million euros each. Above all, it organised the big international opening ceremony for the commemorative events on 4 August 2014 in Liège, gathering official representatives from 83 countries.

- 10 A website with the projects which were labelled and/or subsidised by the federal steering committee was also created.<sup>2</sup> In total, the financial investment of the federal authorities was, however, lower than that of the federated entities. Although this case hardly seemed to be one of the priorities of the federal government, several Flemish members of the House of Representatives and the Flemish Parliament were concerned about recovery tactics to the detriment of Flanders.<sup>3</sup>

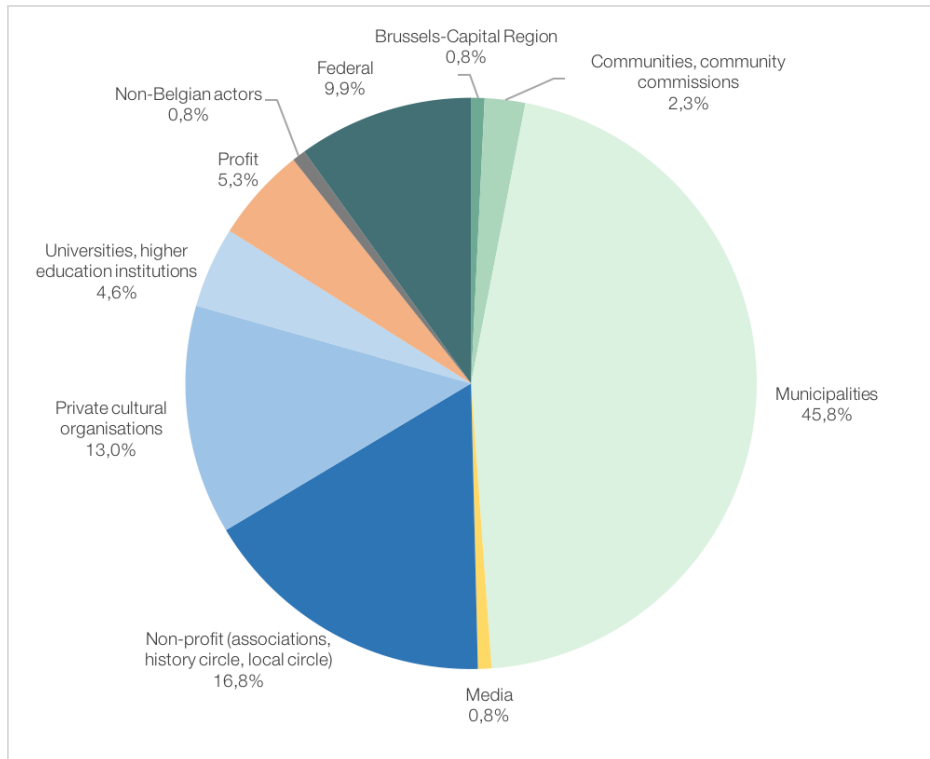
## 2. The organisation of commemorative events in the Brussels-Capital Region

- 11 In this somewhat cacophonous context, with players moving at their own pace, the Brussels-Capital Region could not be outdone. It was the last federated entity to embark on the process of commemoration, as the German Community had chosen not to organise specific events related to this delicate period in its history.
- 12 For the first time since its creation, the government of the Brussels-Capital Region therefore decided to organise a large-scale commemorative event and invest significant means. Since 1989, other anniversaries had of course been celebrated in its territory (the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, the 175th anniversary of Belgium and even the annual armistice ceremonies), but these events resonated above all at national and municipal level. As such, the Brussels-Capital Region was scarcely involved. The centenary had dealt the cards again. Like the other Regions, the Brussels-Capital Region decided to implement a proactive and ambitious heritage and historical memory policy by investing a significant budget amounting to €4 400 000.
- 13 In 2011, socialist minister-president Charles Picqué took over the case. He was questioned in May of the same year by an opposition MP, liberal Françoise Schepmans, and at first was rather vague about his intentions.<sup>4</sup> The Brussels-Capital Region – which had not been contacted by the federal government or by Flanders – had simply chosen to participate in the working group set up in *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*. At the end of 2011, it decided to create its own team composed of political representatives (or of members of their cabinets), civil servants from the Brussels-Capital Region and some historians and event organisers. Under the leadership of Pierre Dejemeppe, a member of Charles Picqué's cabinet who was very interested in the subject, the objective was to examine the ways to highlight the specific nature of Brussels, pointing out that it was the only western European capital to be occupied during the entire conflict. This choice resulted in a focus on awareness-raising (specifically among young people) about daily life in an occupied city, the consequences of the conflict on the economic, social, cultural and political evolution of Brussels and the country, as well as the traces left by the war in the territory of the Region. The idea was to include as many of the inhabitants of Brussels in a reflection on the conflict and its resonance today.

- 14 The working group met on five occasions (between 6 October 2011 and 31 May 2012), and during that time, two studies were commissioned. The first one was on the historical memory registry of the traces of the Great War in the Brussels-Capital Region, and was carried out by Emmanuel Debruyne (UCL). It identified more than 600 traces, half of which concern street names. In the framework of the second study, historians Laurence van Ypersele (UCL), Serge Jaumain (ULB) and Chantal Kesteloot (CEGESOMA) wrote a first report regarding the context in Brussels during World War I. These two initiatives led to the publication of a work in three languages, financed by the Brussels-Capital Region [van Ypersele *et al.*, 2014].
- 15 It is interesting to note that as tourism is a key component of the commemorative programme, the Region wished to participate fully and, its agency for the promotion of tourism, visit.brussels, was associated with the working group from the outset.
- 16 In October 2013, the government of the Brussels-Capital Region – which wished to involve a maximum number of stakeholders in these commemorative events – launched a call for projects for a total amount of 2.5 million euros. The text pointed out that “Brussels was not the scene of trench warfare during which combatants faced each other. Brussels was above all the occupied capital of a country which was profoundly marked by the world conflict. It was also the front row witness of the social divide caused by the war and the resulting fundamental upheavals at the heart of society.”<sup>5</sup> The Brussels-Capital Region thus wished to encourage projects “which did not focus only on acts of war, but which also considered the social divide experienced at the time and the passing on of what the Great War has taught us.”<sup>6</sup> As the main target audiences were young people in Brussels and tourists, these projects had to deepen their knowledge of history, underline the dynamic connections between the Great War and today's society, and of course, reinforce the national and international visibility of Brussels and its attractiveness to foreign visitors. Among others, this involved the promotion of traces of historical memory and heritage related to the conflict in the capital. It is interesting to note that visit.brussels managed the call and not the Brussels-Capital Region, despite its status as political authority.
- 17 In total, 170 projects were submitted to a jury of experts composed of historians, a political official and representatives of visit.brussels. They distributed the budget of 2.5 million euros, favouring the diversity of projects: 131 of them were selected, which led to a certain sprinkling of the financing.<sup>7</sup>
- 18 On examination of the list of beneficiaries, their wide disparity is immediately obvious, including organisations and institutions such as Pro-vélo, Mini-Europe, Ligue Braille, Télé Bruxelles (BX1), the universities in Brussels, most of the municipalities, federal scientific institutions (such as the *Bibliothèque royale* and the *Cinematek*), scientific associative stakeholders (such as *CARHIF - Centre d'Archives et de Recherche pour l'Histoire des Femmes*) and local history or related stakeholders (such as *Cercle d'Histoire de Bruxelles* or *Centre de gastronomie historique*). Certain stakeholders received grants for projects, such as the municipalities of Watermael-Boitsfort (8 projects chosen) and Ixelles, Woluwe-Saint-Pierre and Auderghem (7 projects each). Figure 1 groups the stakeholders/organisers and confirms that it was above all the local authorities which responded with success to the call of the Brussels-Capital Region, representing just under half (46 %) of the subsidised projects. The dynamism of the associations which managed nearly one quarter of the projects chosen (17 %) should also be underlined. They were followed by the cultural institutions and private museums (13 %).<sup>8</sup>

- 19 These data illustrate one of the main characteristics of the call, namely the very local rooting of the projects. The analysis of their content shows that many of them favour emotions, attempting to affect the public in order to prompt them to think about the period of war and in particular about what it means to experience foreign occupation.

**Figure 1. Organisers of the 131 projects selected by visit.brussels**



- 20 Another more classic aspect to single out is that the Brussels-Capital Region decided to undertake a procedure to protect five monuments in remembrance of World War I. They are all situated in the territory of Brussels-City: the monument of Gabrielle Petit (Place Saint-Jean), the monument dedicated to the aviators and balloonists who died during the war (Avenue Franklin Roosevelt), the monument dedicated to the glory of the Belgian infantry (Place Poelaert), the monument expressing Britain's gratitude towards the Belgian nation (Place Poelaert) and the statue of the Brabançonne (Place Surlet de Chokier).

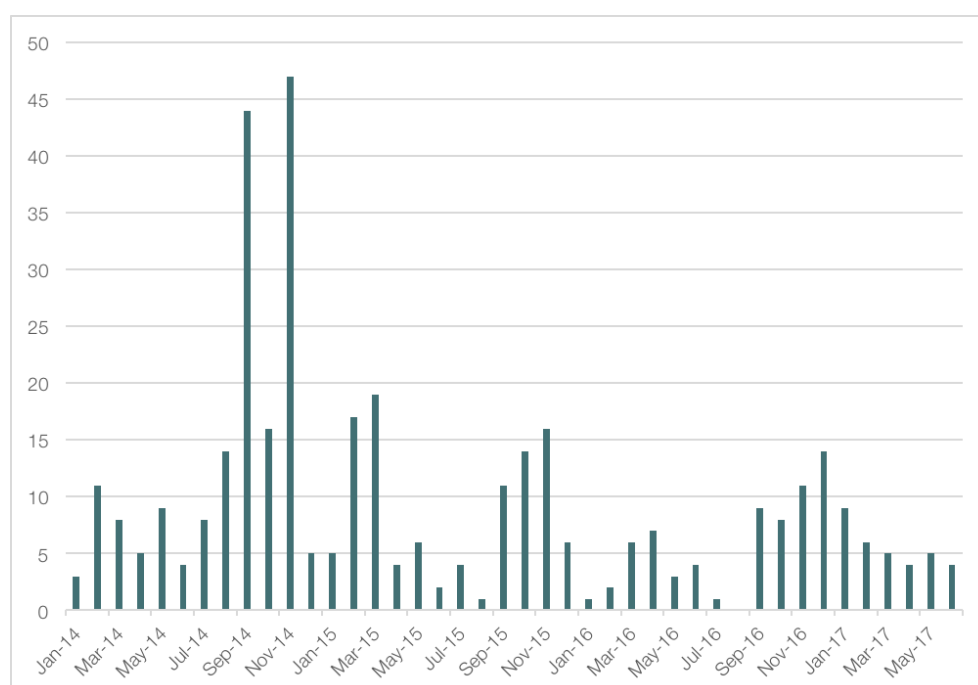
### 3. Studying the centenary commemorative events in Brussels

- 21 It is not too soon to attempt a first retrospective analysis of the commemorative events in Brussels. While they are far from over, a large part of them have already taken place and the rhythm has slowed down significantly in recent months. Now, it is above all the commemorative dates of the major battles which call to mind this centenary, until the end of 2018, which will of course represent the highlight.
- 22 Several researchers have already made interesting observations on these outstanding commemorative events. A “centenary observatory” created at *Université de Paris I* with

historian Nicolas Offenstadt provides a complete overview of research under way in France and around the world.<sup>9</sup> In Belgium, several historians, led mainly by Chantal Kesteloot, have also published first retrospective analyses [Bost and Kesteloot, 2016; Lanneau, 2016; Wouters, 2016]. They have above all studied the political challenges of commemorative events in federal Belgium, and have underlined their exceptional character due to the number and diversity of activities organised, as well as the importance of the commitment of public and semi-public authorities and the new types of interaction with the general public.

- 23 We have therefore chosen to have a first retrospective look at the past three years in the Brussels-Capital Region, and to ask some basic questions: What were the different types of commemorative event organised in the Region? Who were the stakeholders? Are we able to measure the impact of these events yet?
- 24 In an attempt to answer these questions, we have established a first summary of activities related to the commemorative events organised in the territory of the Brussels-Capital Region between 1 January 2014 and 30 June 2017. This study is based on the consultation of programmes, articles, websites, etc., the main media, programmes of cultural institutions, multiple official documents, internet search engines, websites presenting activities in Brussels (quefaire.be, uitinvlaanderen.be, agenda.brussels, etc.), municipal news bulletins, publications in the framework of the centenary, etc. It has also benefited from contacts with staff members from different municipalities and the systematic analysis of the abovementioned call for projects launched by visit.brussels. In total, this vast study allowed us to trace back to 434 very different activities, which serve as a basis for the following analysis.<sup>10</sup> Although it is certainly not exhaustive, the result of the study is already impressive in itself: it is very likely that no other historical event has ever generated as many events of all types in the capital, accompanied by such a mobilisation of public, semi-public, associative and private stakeholders.

**Figure 2. Dates (months) of the start of activities related to the centenary of World War I organised in Brussels between January 2014 and June 2017**

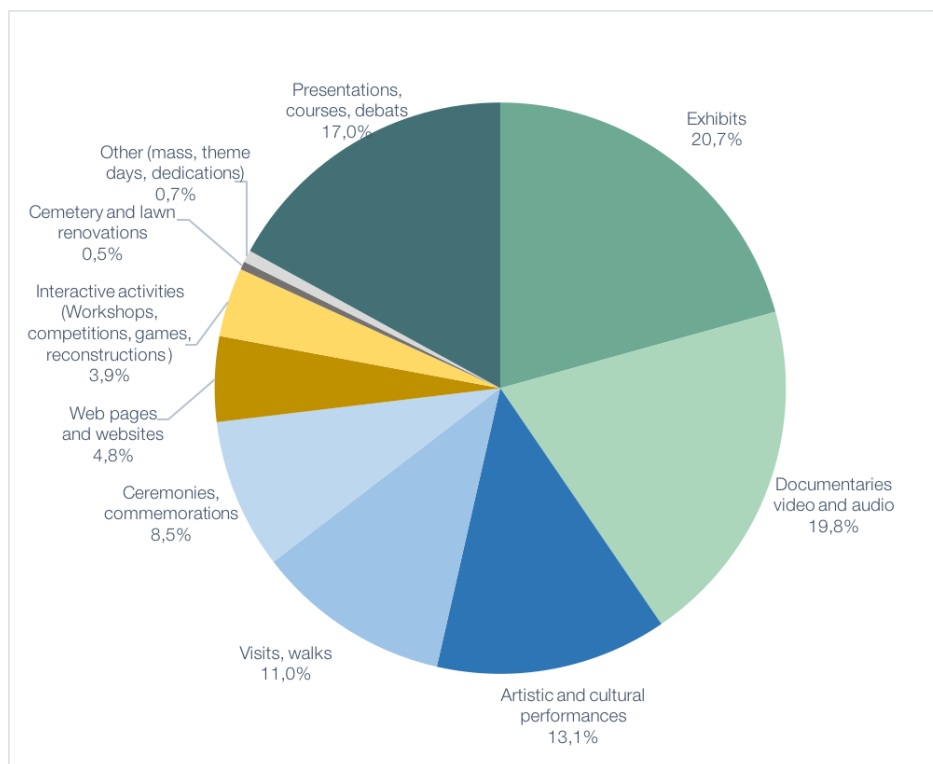




- 25 Of the 434 activities listed, the launch dates for 378 of them could be determined with certainty. Although Figure 2 places all of them on equal footing and therefore does not take their duration into account, it illustrates the historical memory peaks in September and November 2014. These two months account for almost a quarter of the activities in the period under study. The September 2014 peak is explained by the end of the summer holidays: many organisations clearly preferred to wait for the beginning of the school year to mobilise the general public, a few weeks after the official commemorative events marking the beginning of the conflict. This calendar was perhaps also influenced by the history of the conflict, as the occupation of Brussels did not begin until 20 August 1914. In any case, after a calmer month of October, the second peak covered the period around the anniversary of the armistice, which was another logical moment favourable to the launch of new activities.
- 26 The figure also shows that 41 % of the events listed began between September 2014 and March 2015. A large number of organisers therefore chose the very beginning of the centenary and took the school calendar into account. The figure shows a gradual slowing, even if the autumns of 2015 and 2016 were still marked by the launch of new activities, probably sparked by the proximity of the 11 November ceremonies. It is very likely that this overall downward trend will continue until the autumn of 2018, when the centenary of the armistice and the end of the war should lead to another historical memory peak. Brussels was chosen by the federal government to celebrate the end of the conflict officially, despite the fact that 11 November 1918 did not mark the end of the presence of German troops in Brussels. The city even witnessed the constitution of a *Soldatenrat* (German soldiers' council) and the troops rebelled against their officers, leading to acts of violence which, despite the armistice, caused several more deaths. It will be interesting to see if and how these last events will be commemorated. Finally, let us mention that a large exhibit coordinated by CEGESOMA is already planned at *Musée BELvue* in autumn 2018, entitled "*Bruxelles, novembre 2018*".

## 4. The different types of commemoration

**Figure 3. The different types of activity organised in the territory of Brussels related to the centenary of World War I (January 2014 – June 2017)**



- 27 In order to sort all of the activities commemorating this centenary, we have grouped them into approximately ten categories. Of course, certain events fit into several categories, but, in order to facilitate the analysis, we have placed them in the one which we felt best reflected their nature. Figure 3 shows that the majority of the activities in Brussels have a very “educational” character: exhibits, documentaries, courses, visits, publications, etc. Logically, the commemorative events are used to share knowledge about this period through traditional actions for spreading knowledge. There is, however, an impressive number of exhibits, video and audio documentaries (close to one out of five events for each of these categories<sup>11</sup>) and courses or debates. Many stakeholders chose to bank on these very effective forms of popularisation (which sometimes require lengthy preparatory work) to explain the events of the period, place them in their context and present the medium- and long-term consequences through the examination of some specific themes. Let us also point out the dynamism of the sector of artistic and cultural performances, which is a truly original way to draw the attention of the general public to a historical theme. The same is true regarding the games, reconstructions and competitions which create an enjoyable context of activities whose educational character is not obvious at first, but which capture the attention and the interest of a broad public.
- 28 Beyond these general statistics, it is interesting to have a closer look at some of the activities which illustrate the diversity and ingenuity of the means implemented to commemorate this centenary.

## 4.1. Exhibits

- 29 Among all of the exhibits presented in Brussels, several of them have viewed the Great War from a national or international perspective. In particular, let us point out “*Gender@war 1914-1918. Femmes et hommes en guerre*” presented by AVG-CARHIF (*Centre d’Archives et de Recherches pour l’Histoire des Femmes*) at Musée BELvue from September 2015 to January 2016, which approached the conflict from an original angle: visitors were invited to consider the effects of the armed conflicts on the status of men and women in a transnational and comparative perspective (Germany/France/United Kingdom/Belgium). For its part, the *Institut des Vétérans* (a federal institution, which is now part of the new *War Heritage Institute*), which is very committed to the commemorative process (as a member of the federal steering committee), has until now presented “*La Grande Guerre dans les grandes lignes*” in approximately fifteen venues in Brussels, which is a travelling exhibit intended for a very broad public. Composed of thirty or so trilingual panels (French, Dutch, English), it retraces the history of the conflict by following three main lines: local, Belgian and international. For its part, from September 2014 to March 2015, the *Bibliothèque royale* presented “*Shock ! 1914... Et si la guerre commençait demain?*”, an interactive exhibit explaining the role of the media in the broad sense (newspapers as well as posters, post cards, official announcements, etc.) in spreading information at the beginning of the war, by underlining the way in which they influenced public opinion. Finally and above all, “*14-18, c’est notre histoire !*” presented at the *Musée royal de l’Armée et d’Histoire militaire*, was unquestionably the key exhibit during this period. We shall come back to it later.
- 30 Other exhibits considered more specifically the realities of Brussels during the war. In order to limit ourselves to a few examples, let us mention: “*Des maisons pour les héros, 1915-1922. Les cités-jardins et ensembles de logements commémoratifs de la Grande Guerre*” based on the *Archives d’Architecture Moderne*; “*La vie quotidienne à Bruxelles*” presented by the *Cercle d’Histoire de Bruxelles*; “*Bruxelles 14-18*” by the co-operative Expozao, centred on the Marolles; and the exhibit “*Les médecins de l’ULB en 14-18*” at the *Musée de la Médecine de l’Université libre de Bruxelles*, which presented the role and the contribution of these healthcare professionals. Finally, this category also includes “*Bruxelles à l’heure allemande*”, presented by the *Archives de la ville de Bruxelles*, which we shall examine in closer detail below.
- 31 There have been many exhibits organised in the past three years of very different natures. Let us have a look at two of them, each one from one of the two categories mentioned above: “*14-18, c’est notre histoire !*”, which presents the conflict in its entirety, and “*14-18 Bruxelles à l’heure allemande*”, which considers it based on the specific case of Brussels.<sup>12</sup>
- 32 The first of these two exhibits was inaugurated at the *Musée royal de l’Armée et d’Histoire militaire* (a scientific institution under the *Ministère de la Défense nationale*) before the official start of the commemorative events: it opened in February 2014 and continued until November 2015. This very large-scale event went well beyond the framework of Brussels in terms of its subject as well as the target public. In August 2014, the *Musée de la Ville de Bruxelles* inaugurated “*14-18 Bruxelles à l’heure allemande*”, an exhibit with a more local focus on the occupied capital, ending in May 2015 [Pluvinage, 2015]. The comparative analysis of these two commemorative events in Brussels is interesting due to

the fact that beyond the differences in their perspectives and budgets, they illustrate – each in its own way – how the public authorities and the museum institutions agreed on how to commemorate World War I.

- 33 The two exhibits also have in common the fact that they were prepared gradually in a scattered order and sometimes hastily, and that they resulted from the takeover or merging of pre-existing projects, with the risk of accumulating sometimes divergent points of view. Moreover, out of choice or obligation, they took an obvious turn with a focus on heritage, highlighting two remarkable collections, owned by the *Musée royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire militaire* and the *Archives de la ville de Bruxelles*. These objects constituted the main theme of the two exhibits with a generalist aim and which intended above all to outline the impact of World War I on a given place. The presentation of these objects resulted in educational tools which were sometimes very successful, as well as giving the impression that, according to the public authorities, the centenary of the Great War in Brussels simply constituted a prerequisite, rather than a will to exploit the past. They had to be present and visible throughout this “centenary moment”, but the content of the events (far from being unequivocal) was much less important to them.
- 34 Originally intended for Tour & Taxis, “14-18, c’est notre histoire !” responded to the call for tender of the plan of action of the Walloon Region and *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*, which allowed for the financing of a major exhibit. It was finally moved to *Musée de l’Armée*, which had initially hoped to inaugurate its new permanent space on World War I in 2014. As there were logistical problems which had delayed this reorganisation, the transfer of “14-18, c’est notre histoire !” to the *Cinquantenaire* appeared to be the ideal fall-back solution. This resulted in a multilayer exhibit: responsible for the “Tour & Taxis” project, the private company *Tempora/Musée de l’Europe* elaborated – with the help of a scientific committee – the general concept of its exhibit. Next to it, the rooms devoted to the occupation constituted a “light” version of what was supposed to become the new permanent space of the museum, while others presenting the intertwining fate of King Albert I and Emperor William II were originally supposed to constitute a separate exhibit. As an indication of the composite character of “14-18, c’est notre histoire !” there was a sign informing visitors that the scientific committee was in no way liable for the film – the highlight of the visit, which was made by *Tempora/Musée de l’Europe*. Although it was financed surprisingly by the federal state in symbiosis with its federated entities, the national perspective was favoured quite obviously at this commemorative event, which probably received more visitors than all of the other events in Brussels.
- 35 The city of Brussels could not be left out of the commemorative events, but as there was no project for a major local exhibit, a pragmatic approach prevailed in this case as well, favouring the revision of a pre-existing project. “14-18 Bruxelles à l’heure allemande” was to a large degree based on a previous exhibit, “*Bruxelles 14-18. Au jour le jour, une ville en guerre*” carried out in collaboration with *Université libre de Bruxelles* (ULB), from November 2005 to February 2006 at the town hall [Jaumain and Piette, 2005]. Nine years later, the exhibit crossed the Grand-Place and was set up in *Maison du Roi*, with the main novelty being the addition of features regarding Germany, comparing the experience of the Belgian capital with that of German cities.
- 36 At first sight, these two exhibits in Brussels were in keeping with the postnational rhetoric centred on peace, which characterises the new war museography. The giving up of the former patriotic keys for understanding went hand in hand with a noteworthy thematic shift: at the heart of these two projects, military operations made way for the

experience of civilian populations. While “14-18 Bruxelles à l’heure allemande” ended with a reflection on peace (“Peace is about far more than putting weapons aside” – statement by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon), it was the exhibit as a whole which intended to reconcile the experiences of civilian populations during war: after seeing the photographs of the endless queues in front of the soup kitchen in the Belgian capital, visitors saw almost identical images of Dusseldorf and Berlin. The press release for the exhibit summarised it well: although Germany and Belgium were enemies, “the civilians in both countries had the same concerns”.<sup>13</sup>

- 37 This inclusive rhetoric was also present in “14-18, c’est notre histoire !” – even in the title of the exhibit. From a European perspective, there were only victims of the war. As regards the causes of the conflict: it was not the fault of a single nation, but of all of them. The heated debates on the question of war responsibilities (*Kriegsschuldfrage*), which have been going on since 1914 and have been revived recently by Christopher Clark’s best seller (*The Sleepwalkers*), were cautiously left in the shadows. The film mentioned above, which was the conclusion to the exhibit, placed this shared responsibility in a teleological history of the European Union, presented as the best remedy against inhumanity. Starting with the violence which marked the first part of the 20th century, this film showed that the nationalist rift was followed by European reconciliation – the German and French leaders Helmut Kohl and François Mitterrand hand in hand in Verdun – ending in a blaze of glory with the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the European Union.
- 38 Does this mean that the patriotic contexts which had dominated the memory of the war for so long have disappeared altogether? It is interesting to note that in contradiction with this narrative of the European project, at certain times “14-18, c’est notre histoire !” literally returned to the classic themes which had given rise to the image of *Poor Little Belgium*. In the spaces dedicated to the two royal cousins whom the war had opposed, Albert I was depicted as a hero who had refused courageously to give in to the German ultimatum – “what a nerve!” in the words of the exhibit – while William II was depicted as a character in an operetta, wavering between ridiculousness and madness. One century after the conflict, the allied propaganda surprisingly got its second wind at the exhibit, without actually telling the story of these antagonistic representations.
- 39 For its part, “14-18 Bruxelles à l’heure allemande” told the story of the occupation of the capital by focusing on the patriotic productions acquired by the *Archives de la Ville de Bruxelles* in the post-war years and in particular the superb collection of the *Fonds Eugène Keym*, deputy mayor of Watermael-Boisfort who, during the conflict, gathered a series of *war souvenirs*, many of which were of an iconographic nature [Jaumain and Piette, 2005b]. These caricatures, clandestine publications and three-coloured *memorabilia* were remarkable due to their aesthetic quality and the moral universe which they revealed, and echoed the “anti-Boche fair” organised in 1918, without actually placing them in the contexts and social spaces which gave rise to them. The occupying forces, those who were indifferent, the Flemish activists and other “uncivil” people therefore only appeared through the patriotic prism which was a direct result of the 1914-1918 war culture. Even during the post-national period, has World War I remained a war of nations?
- 40 By looking at the stakeholders and rhetoric of these two exhibits in Brussels on the Great War, we therefore see that these events are the result of a certain improvisation and a mix of interpretive frameworks. Far from being the fruit of a carefully thought out policy

controlled from above, in the end, these two exhibits from Brussels were a good reflection of the equivocal character of the centenary commemorative events.

## 4.2. Video and audio documentaries

- 41 Along with the exhibits, a series of video and audio documentaries on Brussels were also produced. This is the case, for example, with the film cycle "*Brussel en de Groote Oorlog*" at the Cinematek, the animated film "*De Groote Oorlog in Brussel door kinderen*" by the Flemish non-profit association Kidscam, or television programmes such as "*Avenue de l'Yser*" presented on BX1 to raise awareness among a wide audience regarding the traces of the conflict in the city, via a relaxed discussion between young students and some historians. This last series of programmes was supposed to be put on DVD as an educational tool for schools in Brussels.<sup>14</sup>
- 42 Furthermore, all of the audiovisual media also gave extensive coverage to the commemorative events as of August 2014 with day-to-day reports recounting the events which had unfolded a century earlier. Among the innumerable initiatives which go beyond the framework of Brussels, let us mention the RTBF television programme "*La guerre 14-18 racontée aux enfants*" or Musiq3, which chose to approach World War I through the prism of music. For their part, the main Flemish channels VTM and above all VRT launched a series of initiatives such as the film "*In Vlaamse velden*" or the documentaries "*Brave Little Belgium*" and "*Small hands in a big war*", with the latter targeting a young audience.

## 4.3. Artistic and cultural performances

- 43 Figure 3 shows that artistic performances represent just over 13 % of all of the events listed. This underlines once again the extreme diversity of activities thanks to the financing available to the creators (who chose to focus their creations on an original reflection on World War I) or simply cultural coordinators (who planned activities related to World War I as part of the major communication campaign organised for the centenary).
- 44 During the first three years of this centenary, a series of artistic performances were therefore centred on the war or used it as an entry door or a main theme for dealing with a contemporary subject which is closer to the public or more controversial, and to make an original connection – one hundred years apart – between the reality of yesterday and that of today. This is the case for example of various events on the theme of migration and exile, the notion of war in general (including pacifism and conscientious objection), as well as love, with the war serving as a backdrop to tell the story of an impossible or forbidden love, modelled on Romeo and Juliet, or even to explore the theme of homosexuality in the trenches. Other themes were centred more on Brussels, such as that of Brussels folklore, in particular through songs sung with the local accent.
- 45 To confine ourselves to just a few examples, let us mention the play "*Exils 1914 – Les oubliés de la Grande Guerre*" by the theatre company MAPS, accompanied by an educational kit,<sup>15</sup> which presents the life of three exiles whose destinies meet – with a very modern slant. In quite a different style, the presentation of "*Ode aan de deserteur*" by American/Belgian composer Frederic Rzewski is an occasion to take a fresh look (far from the traditional patriotic celebrations) at the deserter figure during World War I and in the contemporary



wars. Let us also mention the German rock music group *Einstürzende Neubauten*, who composed an album for the city of Dixmude to commemorate World War I, and presented it at a concert in Brussels at the *Ancienne Belgique*. Many concerts have been organised in connection with the commemorative events, several of which were at the initiative of the *Orchestre national de Belgique*. Let us also mention the interesting example of the Egyptian stage director Laila Soliman, who created “*Hawa Elhorreya*” (*Whims of Freedom*), an original work about Egypt and World War I, which – through songs and texts – draws a series of parallels between this period and the situation in Egypt today.

#### 4.4. Visits and walks

- 46 Many organisations also offer guided tours of Brussels on the theme of World War I, such as the educational circuit “*14-18 Bruxelles occupée*” by the heritage and citizenship classes, available as an application for tablet and smartphone.<sup>16</sup> This activity – which is intended for schools in Brussels – gets students to walk through the city centre with a tablet, looking for traces of the conflict in order to better understand daily life in occupied Brussels. Based on this experience in the field, the objective is to encourage young students to consider the conflict and its impact on daily life. Interestingly, the students are also invited to reflect on the very principle of commemorative events, as at the end of the circuit they are prompted to question the reasons for them. Let us also mention the project “*Brussels@War*”, by the VUB research communication department (*Wetenschapscommunicatie*): an “Urban Game” with an application which is used during a circuit through Brussels while answering a series of questions on World War I.<sup>17</sup>
- 47 Many other organisations with very different profiles also offer more traditional guided tours such as *Brukselbinnenstebuiten*, *Association de Guides pour Bruxelles et Belgique (GBB)*, *Klare Lijn*, *Korei*, *Itinéraires – sur les Sentiers de l’histoire*, *E-Guides*, *Arkadia*, *Bus Bavard*, *Bravo Discovery*, *Pro Vélo*, *Laeken Découverte*, etc.
- 48 We can see here that the extent to which the call for projects and the unique framework of the centenary led many associations – which, in principle, had no connection to the commemorative events – to integrate them into their annual programme and often make a request for financing. In this respect, guided tours appear to be an activity which is relatively easy to start up, which probably explains their numbers. However, according to several organisers, despite the size of this offer, the demand for it has often been rather limited.

#### 4.5. Official ceremonies

- 49 Commemorative events of course always involve official ceremonies. While the centenary of World War I is no exception to the rule, Figure 3 shows that they constitute only a small proportion of all of the activities listed. Along with some official events of a national character related to the status of Brussels as a capital city, many ceremonies were organised above all by the municipal authorities. They are often part of a very local approach via homages to municipal heroes, whose memory has been preserved at the municipal cemetery or in some street names. The local and often somewhat formal ceremonies have generally mobilised three distinct types of public: the municipal authorities, schoolchildren and what may be referred to as “representatives of the homeland” (police, army, World War II veterans, etc.). The mobilisation of schools is

interesting: no other public seems to have been asked as often to participate in these ceremonies. It should also be noted that when the municipal authorities organise such events, most of the time they do so alone: there are few collaborations with civil society organisations or with other municipalities. Finally, let us underline the major differences in the types of commemoration and the levels of involvement of municipalities. Some municipalities such as Etterbeek have increased the number of official ceremonies and military tributes, while others, such as Berchem-Sainte-Agathe, prefer more enjoyable activities, as we shall see below.

#### 4.6. Web pages and websites

- 50 The creation of many websites has been another way to raise awareness among the general public regarding the reality of the Great War. In order to reach the inhabitants of Brussels as well as tourists, *visit.brussels* chose to reinforce the visibility of the Region by hiring CEGESOMA to design a modern, dynamic and trilingual website which makes use of 80 photos to present the war experience of the inhabitants of Brussels, based on three moments: the beginning of the war, the occupation and the end of the war.<sup>18</sup> *visit.brussels* also presents a webpage with a list of activities for tourists and inhabitants of Brussels who are interested in knowing a little bit more about life in the capital under the occupation.<sup>19</sup> In particular, it includes an agenda of commemorative events, several itineraries for visits and several links to written and image resources in relation to World War I, as well as a Facebook page also made by CEGESOMA which is updated regularly, regarding the war experience of the Brussels journalist Paul Max.<sup>20</sup>
- 51 The *Archives de la Ville de Bruxelles* also created a website entitled “*Bruxelles occupée 14-18*”,<sup>21</sup> which highlights their impressive collections and provides information on the daily life of the inhabitants of Brussels, as well as some additional resources for schools or the public with a wish to go further into a subject. The website also provides an alphabetical list entitled “*soldats 14-18*”, whose purpose is not very clear.<sup>22</sup> Parallel initiatives (with a wider scope, integrating information on Brussels) have been carried out by other institutions such as *In Flanders Fields Museum* in Ypres, which aims to compile a complete list (the “*Namenlijst*”<sup>23</sup>) of the people who were killed in the Belgian territory during the Great War (regardless of their nationality or profile), or the *Belgian War Dead Register*<sup>24</sup> of the *Institut des Vétérans*, which lists the Belgian soldiers who died (initially begun for World War I, it aims to include other conflicts).
- 52 Among the many websites created in connection with this centenary, let us also mention the blog developed by the *Archives et Bibliothèques* at *Université libre de Bruxelles*, which, with the help of the *Union des Anciens Étudiants*, shares short texts on World War I supported by original documents, photos and information mainly from collections in the university archives.<sup>25</sup> Conversely, there were several temporary websites which prolonged the experience at an exhibit. They disappeared from the internet when their addresses were used by companies or organisations which have nothing to do with the initial subject.<sup>26</sup>
- 53 Finally, let us point out that while the websites of the two main communities provide an agenda of activities, in particular those which take place in the territory of Brussels,<sup>27</sup> the website of the federal government only mentions those organised by the Belgian state as well as the “projects labelled and/or subsidised by the federal steering committee for the commemoration of World War I”.<sup>28</sup>



- 54 The increase in the number of websites along with the impressive use of social networks is one of the main novelties of these commemorative events, which has probably contributed to removing certain geographical and social barriers allowing everyone to visit many exhibits virtually or to benefit from all of the resources available on the internet. This evolution has also contributed to shaping other much more individualised ways to discover the history of the conflict, whereby everyone is able to organise their own approach according to their personal wishes and interests.

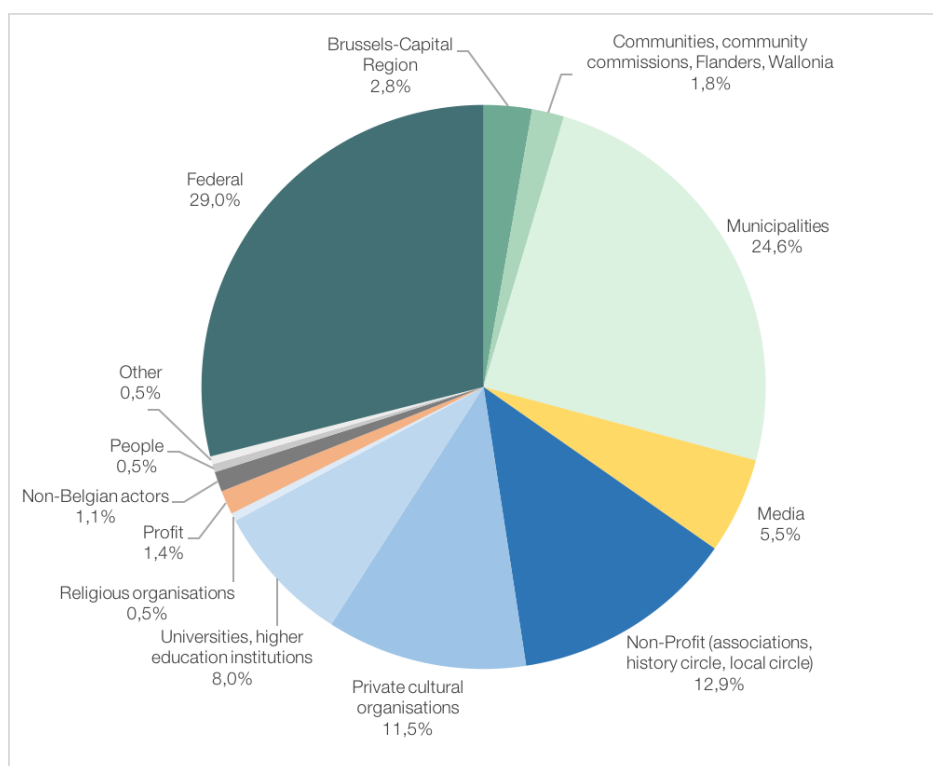
## 4.7. Recreational activities

- 55 The dramatic character of these four years of profound suffering has not stopped certain organisations from raising awareness among the population regarding this period of war, and even from getting them to reflect on its meaning, through more recreational activities. This was the case, for example, with the sewing guide entitled "*Nénette et Rintintin*" or of the coupon "*20 minutes de plaisir*", two activities organised in Berchem-Sainte-Agathe, illustrating the creativity of certain event organisers, and its risks.
- 56 The workshop "*Nénette et Rintintin*" was a reference to two cheap little woollen dolls made during the war as lucky charms for the soldiers or civilians and to protect them from the bombing. The municipality of Berchem-Sainte-Agathe decided to revive this superstition by publishing a guide for making these dolls.
- 57 The activity entitled "*20 minutes de plaisir*" organised on 8 March 2015 on the occasion of Woman's Day is even more original, as it honours the women who worked in the shell factories during World War I. The witty remark, "If the women who work in the factories stopped for twenty minutes, the Allies would lose the war", is attributed to French marshal Joseph Joffre. Based on this idea, the municipality inserted a "*Bon cadeau 20 minutes*" (20-minute gift coupon) for all types of beauty care, which the female readers of the municipal magazine *Berchem News* could cut out and give to a man they knew.<sup>29</sup> This fun way of linking current events (Woman's Day) with the commemorative events is a good illustration of the limits and risks of this type of activity when it does not have any scientific supervision. The project was based on an excellent idea as it wished "to honour all of the women of Berchem," calling to mind that as the men were serving their country during the conflict, "the women were becoming emancipated and were working in ammunition factories for 10 to 13 hours per day in terrible conditions".<sup>30</sup> The municipal magazine never specified, however, that this situation had nothing to do with the personal experience of the women in Berchem or even in Brussels during the war. While it corresponded with the reality in France, it did not apply to Belgium where almost all of the territory was occupied. Not only did women never work in this type of factory, but the reality in Brussels was that of generalised unemployment and was based on a return to more traditional chores for women. Admittedly, the little text in the Berchem magazine did not explicitly refer to daily life in Belgium during World War I, but one would have to be quite clever to know that it was specifically about France. This small example illustrates the limits of certain original initiatives, which could be counterproductive by spreading imprecise and therefore incorrect information on the reality of World War I. While the appropriation of history by all people is an important process, it is essential for historians to be associated with it even if historians Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan noted with a touch of irony, that the commemoration policy was, apparently, too important to leave to historians [Winter and Sivan, 2000: 8].

## 4.8. Publications

- 58 In concluding this brief overview of some of the activities organised in the Brussels-Capital Region, it is interesting to mention the publications made in the framework of this centenary. For practical reasons,<sup>31</sup> we have not included them in the list of events in Brussels presented in Figure 3, yet it is obvious that the commemorative events have been accompanied by a multitude of publications. While many of them go beyond the framework of Brussels or are aimed at the general public with the will to popularise historical knowledge, some of them are also the fruit of new research.
- 59 Along with many articles in newspapers and periodicals published over the past three years, let us point out the works published in connection with the exhibits mentioned above [Gubin and De Smaele, 2015; Mayer, 2014; Dupuis, 2014]. In addition to these, there have been more specific publications about commemorative monuments [Mihail, 2014, van Ypersele, 2014b], heroines of the resistance [Boudin, 2015; de Schaepdrijver, 2015] and a more local theme such as the perception of the war by families in Ixelles [*Service des archives*, 2014]. The journal *Cahiers bruxellois* also published a special issue on “*Villes en guerre*” which included some texts on folklore, education and the clergy in Brussels during the conflict [Pluvinage, 2014b].
- 60 Among the more global works about Brussels, there has been of course the synopsis published in three languages, on the initiative of the Brussels-Capital Region, regarding the memory and traces of the war in Brussels, mentioned above [van Ypersele *et al.*, 2014]. It is both a summary of World War I in the capital and the fruit of innovative research on what remains of it today in the urban landscape. Let us also point out the work “*Bruxelles, ville occupée*” [Benvindo and Kesteloot, 2016] which is based on an extensive series of images and, as it were, acts as a prolongation of the website by *visit.brussels* on the occupied capital. Let us finally mention the synopsis, published by *Brussels Studies* just over one year ago, which provided an initial overview of the material and above all immaterial traces of the conflict in Brussels, by underlining how the commemorative events had contributed to their rehabilitation [Jaumain and Jourdain, 2016].

## 5. The stakeholders

**Figure 4. The stakeholders/organisers of WWI projects in the Brussels-Capital Region**

In this figure, the category "municipalities" presents the municipalities of Brussels as well as all of their departments (archives, libraries, cultural service, municipal non-profit associations, etc.) when they act as organisers. In the same way, the category "federal" includes the federal institutions (scientific and cultural) such as the *Cinématek*, *Bibliothèque royale*, *Institut des Vétérans*, CEGESOMA, *Musée royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire militaire*, BOZAR and *La Monnaie*. The category "people" refers to individuals who are at the origin of the organisation of an event. The "private cultural institutions" include the main cultural stakeholders apart from museums, such as Flagey or Kaaitheater, as well as companies such as MAPS, *Archives d'Architecture Moderne*, etc. The category "profit" includes private commercial organisations (according to the available information) and includes, in particular, galleries and private contractors. In the case of the coproduction of events, we have chosen the main organiser.

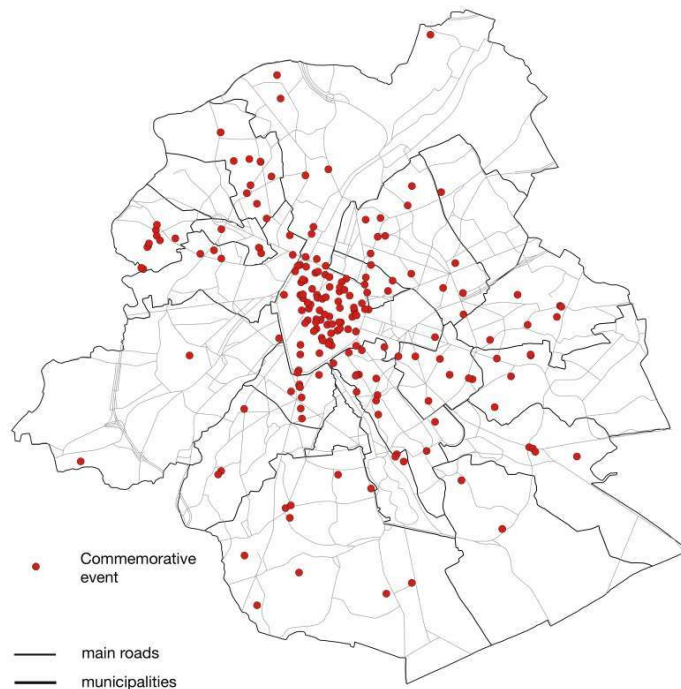
- 61 The significance of the municipalities of Brussels in the organisation of commemorative events is one of the main observations in our study. The analysis of the results of the call for projects launched by the Brussels-Capital Region already showed that 46 % of them were municipal initiatives (Figure 1). If we consider all of the "WWI activities", regardless of their financing, the municipalities are still at the origin of one quarter of them. This illustrates once again the will to commemorate the centenary at local level, even though, as we have underlined, the level of activities varies greatly from one municipality to another.
- 62 The capital city has naturally been the focus of attention from the federal authorities (and its scientific and cultural institutions), thus explaining its position in the figure, which shows that in the end, the public institutions are very much in the majority in the organisation of events in Brussels. If we group the activities whose stakeholders are the local, regional, community and federal authorities (therefore including the museums, cultural organisations, educational institutions, etc.), they represent more than half of all of them. For their part, the associations which were at the origin of one quarter of the activities financed by the call for projects of the Brussels-Capital Region, are less present

(12 %) when all of the activities in Brussels are considered, which seems to indicate that their activities depend greatly on external financing.

- 63 Except in the cultural domain, private commercial event organisers are almost absent. Despite the clearly stated economic objectives (development of tourist activity, etc.) of some of the activities for the centenary, the organisation of events has mainly been in the hands of the public authorities. The direct collaborations between the public and private sector are limited, as are the collaborations within the public sector. Each one targets its own public first, and the contacts between the different spheres (academic, artistic, municipal) remain rather limited and are sometimes even tinged with a competitive spirit [Wouters, 2016]. Finally, despite the very international character of Brussels, activities organised by non-Belgian stakeholders (*Lycée français*, *Finncult – Institut culturel finlandais pour le Benelux* – or the museum of European history) are rare.
- 64 And the historians? Have they been among the “stakeholders” of these commemorative events? They rarely initiate projects, and do not often appear in our statistics. They have, however, often played the role of direct or indirect adviser for organisers and have participated on project selection committees. However, the financing of academic research in history has not been a priority of the commemorative events. The federal scientific policy has nevertheless financed two major interuniversity projects (*Experiences and Memories of the Great War* and *The Great War from Below*), *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles* has financed three doctoral research projects and the Brussels-Capital Region has financed the abovementioned study of the material traces of the conflict. In addition, there is of course the traditional financing from FRS-FNRS and FWO or the universities themselves. In total, academic research has therefore not remained completely outside of the centenary, as evidenced by the number of doctoral theses on World War I written in Belgium in the context of the commemorative events: 34 compared to 24 in the past thirty years [Naert *et al.*, 2016: 227], to the point of giving rise to what is sometimes called “*the 14-18 centenary Generation of Doctoral Researchers*” [Naert *et al.*, 2016: 230]. However, very few theses focus specifically on Brussels.
- 65 The few examples presented in this article illustrate that if there had been the desire to *immerse* the public in the past, historians have often been *drawn by the present*, requested by the general public and by different event organisers to participate in or at least to provide an opinion on the organisation of many different activities. This evolution has contributed to giving a boost to the development of *public history*, more than ever underlining its pertinence. From this point of view, the commemorative events constitute an original moment of reflection on the social role of historians and their relationship with the general public – issues which have been at the heart of many questions in recent years [Witte, 2010; Wouters, 2016].
- 66 This movement was so powerful that even young doctoral candidates (who have the obligation to give priority to the production of academic research which has value on an international CV) question the best way for a broad public to benefit from the fruit of their research. They have put forth some innovative ideas such as the creation of labels recognised by the academic community, which encourage the writing of books which are accessible to a broad public [Naert *et al.*, 2016: 245].
- 67 Thanks to this centenary, we are probably witnessing a sort of *revolution of commemorative events*, which are becoming *complete events*, to a large extent drawing from the range of emotions and transforming the public into stakeholder. The simple historical reminder has given way to *awareness raising* about the past combined with the desire to reach some

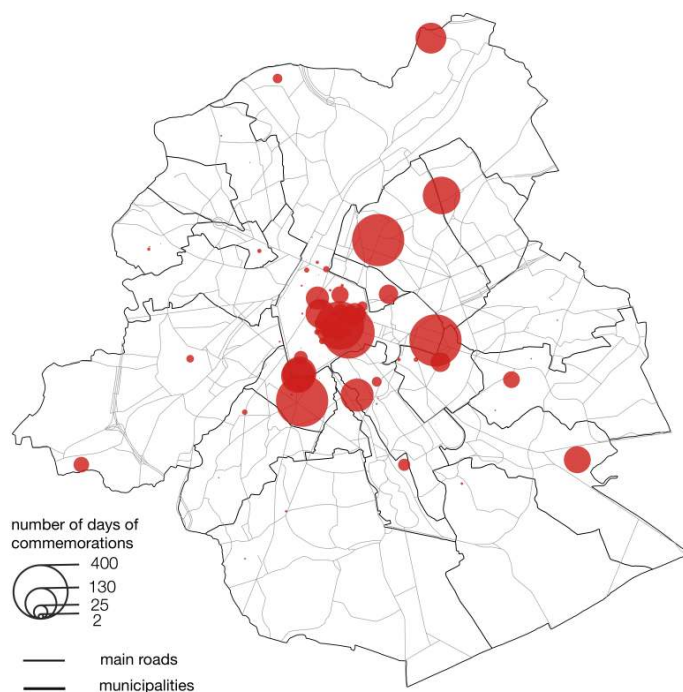
objectives which are well rooted in the present. The many events mentioned here have not only allowed World War I to be part of the collective imagination, but they have made people reflect on its historical meaning and above all on the way in which it allows them to have a better understanding of the present and shed light on the future.

**Figure 5a. Location of World War I commemorative events in the Brussels-Capital Region (January 2014 – June 2017)**



- 68 A look at the location of events (Figure 5a) shows that they are spread out throughout the territory of the Brussels-Capital Region: we have identified some in almost every municipality. The map also shows the high concentration of activities in the pentagon area. As is often the case, it benefits from its political and geographical centrality, the concentration of a large number of cultural and tourist sites and, probably from the fact that it symbolises “occupied Brussels”. The map also illustrates the existence of a split which more or less follows the line of the canal in Brussels: most of the activities are concentrated in the pentagon area and the municipalities in the eastern part of the inner ring. Outside of this area, activities do take place in two small municipalities in the northeast of the Region: Berchem-Sainte-Agathe and Jette.

**Figure 5b. Duration of World War I commemorative events in the Brussels-Capital Region (January 2014 – June 2017)**



- 69 The second map (Figure 5b.) complements the geographical vision with the addition of a parameter: the duration of each event. In this way, it presents a slightly different image, which confirms the significance of the pentagon area, yet unsurprisingly shows a high concentration of the longest events (exhibits in particular) in the eastern part of the pentagon area (the upper part of the city) and in close proximity, the municipalities in the eastern part of the inner ring. The map highlights some focal points which follow the geography of cultural infrastructures, including the *Musée royal de l'Armée* at the *Parc du cinquanteenaire* which held the big exhibit mentioned above, as well as *Musée BELvue*, *Musée de la Porte de Hal*, *Musée de la Ville de Bruxelles*, the *Archives de la Ville de Bruxelles* or the *Archives d'Architecture Moderne*. A few rare locations further from the centre are associated with theme-based exhibits, such as *Maison Autrique* (Schaerbeek), the *Musée de la radiologie* (*Hôpital militaire*), the *Musée bruxellois du moulin et de l'alimentation* in Evere and *Rouge-Cloître* in Auderghem.
- 70 In other words, these two maps show that while the commemorative events tried to reach the broadest public through a large number of local activities, without requiring travel to the traditional tourist sites, the pentagon area and its surrounding neighbourhoods (with an emphasis on the major museums and cultural venues) are unsurprisingly at the heart of the plan of action.

## 6. The “impact” on the public

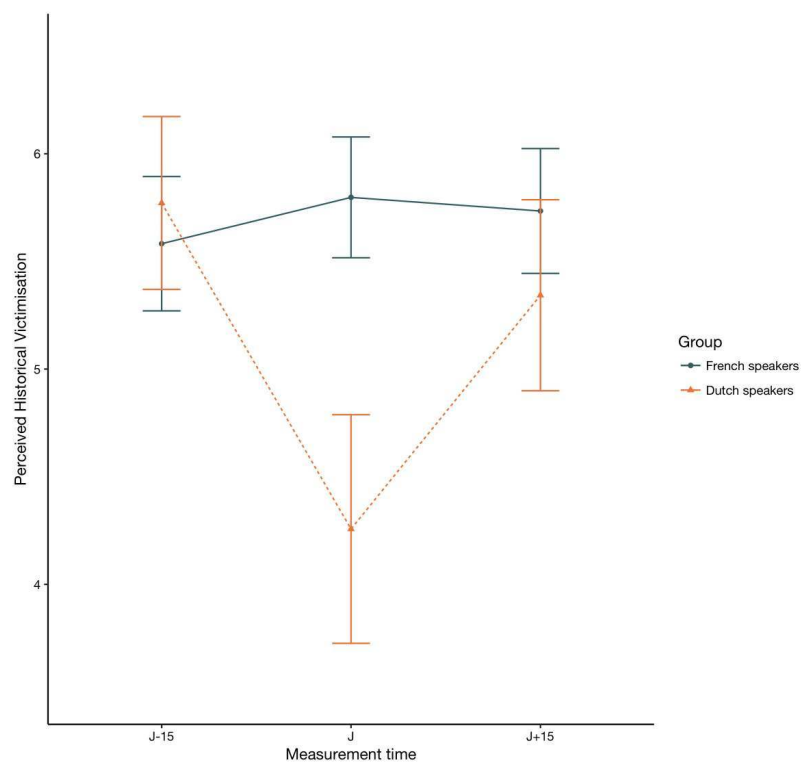
- 71 It is impossible to provide reliable attendance figures for each activity discussed here. The numbers vary greatly: from several dozens of visitors for local exhibits, to several



tens of thousands of visitors for national and international exhibits. These events have not left the public feeling indifferent. Yet it is extremely difficult to evaluate their impact. However, some specific approaches may provide interesting elements for reflection. This is the case with the pervading “sense of victimisation” in the collective memory of certain groups, which may be passed down for several generations [Wohl and Van Bavel, 2011; Vollhardt, 2012]. In Belgium, a representation of the country as an “innocent victim” of German cruelty very soon dominated during [Amara, 2000] and then after World War I and led to a very strong anti-German sentiment. Other internal oppositions within Belgian society (not the least being the linguistic tensions) also played a role and led to debates with a strong political connotation on the number of Flemish victims among the soldiers on the front [Van Everbrouck, 1995], the role and impact of German *Flamenpolitik*, and the postwar repercussions of Flemish activism [Monballyu, 2010; Wils, 1974; Van Velthoven, 2011].<sup>32</sup> A century after the beginning of the Great War, the activities related to the commemorative events are therefore a good occasion to question the representations of the conflict among the young inhabitants of Brussels. Do they still have a feeling of victimisation? Are they similar among students in French-language and Dutch-language schools? Have the events organised in the framework of the centenary influenced these representations?

- 72 In an attempt to answer these questions, a study was conducted by a team at *Université libre de Bruxelles* among students from two secondary schools in Brussels (5th year) – one of them French-language (N = 83), and the other, Dutch-language (N = 46) – who had visited the exhibit “14-18, c’est notre histoire !” in a school context. These 129 young people (75 of whom were male) whose average age was 16 and a half, were questioned before and after visiting the exhibit.<sup>33</sup> This study was based on the principle that the context of a social group influences the way in which individuals remember their group's past [Halbwachs, 1950/1980]. This perceived collective victimisation consists in a “state of mind shared by the members of a group, which results in the perception of intentional harm with serious and lasting consequences on a group by one or several other groups” [Bar-Tal, *et al.*, 2009: 238]. The results of the study suggest that before visiting the exhibit, a high level of “perceived historical victimisation” and a low level of “current victimisation” existed among the students in Brussels from the two main communities.<sup>34</sup>
- 73 A statistical analysis with repeated measurements (i.e. involving a situation in which the same subjects are submitted to different study methods or conditions) conducted with the linguistic group as an inter-subject factor after the visit provides an understanding of its impact on “perceived historical victimisation”. This time, the results indicated different effects according to linguistic group. While the “perceived historical victimisation” of students at the French-language school in Brussels does not seem to have been influenced by the visit, that of the students from the Dutch-language school decreased significantly after the visit, rising to the initial level 15 days later (Figure 6a). In the case of “current victimisation”, a global and similar effect was observed in the two groups: this feeling increased after visiting the exhibit, and then decreased slightly 15 days later (Figure 6b).

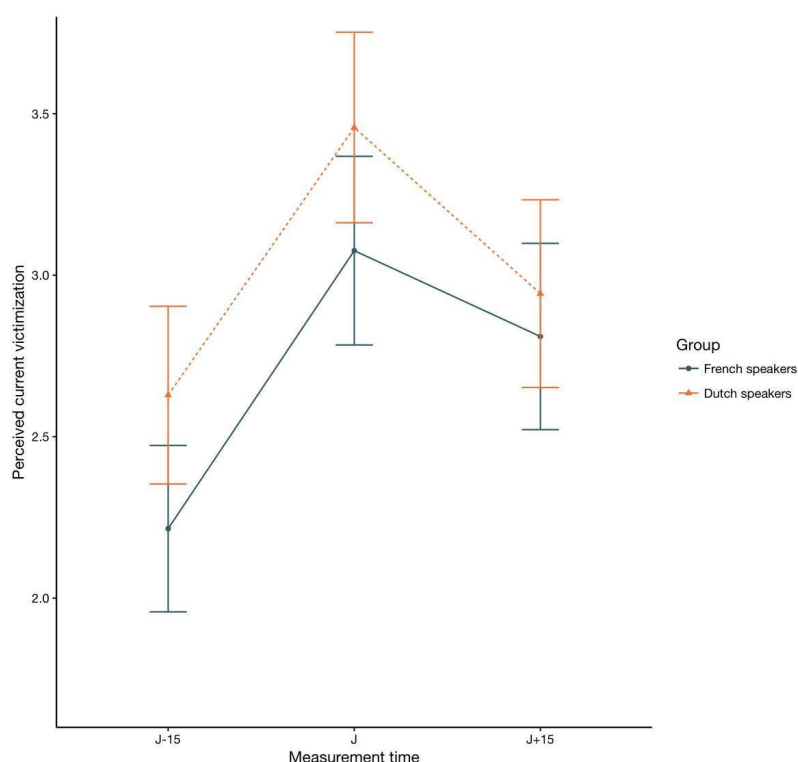
Figure 6a. Effect of the linguistic group on historical victimisation



**THE DOTS ("CIRCLES" AND "TRIANGLES") CORRESPOND TO AVERAGES OF PERCEIVED HISTORICAL VICTIMISATION. THE MARGINS OF ERROR REPRESENT CONFIDENCE INTERVALS OF 95 %.**



Figure 6b. Effect of the linguistic group on the feeling of current victimisation



**THE DOTS ("CIRCLES" AND "TRIANGLES") CORRESPOND TO AVERAGES OF PERCEIVED CURRENT VICTIMISATION. THE MARGINS OF ERROR REPRESENT CONFIDENCE INTERVALS OF 95 %.**

- 74 How can these results be interpreted? It is likely that belonging to a “nation” which was invaded and occupied during the two world conflicts would partly explain the high level of “historical victimisation”, but it also corresponds to a widely shared view of an absurd war which had a cruel impact on peoples. The low level of “current victimisation” is explained by the amount of time which has passed since the events, which means that students in Brussels are hardly aware of their consequences. The disappearance of all of the direct witnesses, the global context of peace in most of western Europe and the perception of an international context in which former enemies have become today's allies, explains this result for the most part. But the most interesting element in this study is probably the fact that the students from schools belonging to two linguistic communities show similar feelings of “collective victimisation”. Although these results say nothing about the great narratives which structure the collective memory of the young inhabitants of Brussels, it is worth underlining them in a country where the school curricula are specific to the communities and where collective memory varies greatly from one side of the linguistic boundary to the other. Even if the very limited nature of the study should prompt caution, it seems to suggest the existence of a common collective memory of the events of the Great War, which, at least in Brussels, transcends the two main linguistic communities.
- 75 Furthermore, this analysis shows that an exhibit may help to modify the collective representations of a century-old event significantly. With the exception of the feeling of historical victimisation perceived by the young people at the French-language school, the other representations were influenced by the visit, but this influence seems limited in

time as it fades within 15 days, which is the other main observation from this study. We may thus conclude that a large-scale temporary exhibit such as “14-18, c’est notre histoire !” has a temporary impact on collective memory and that in order to prolong its influence in the middle and long term, the visit must be complemented and aided by other activities. Other studies have pointed out the importance of the role and skills of teachers in this process [Kavadias *et al.*, 2010].

## Conclusions

- 76 The centenary of World War I has marked an abrupt change: it is likely that the historical events will never be commemorated in the same way, especially in Belgium. The federated entities have vividly demonstrated the autonomous role which they intend to play in future events of this type. The Brussels-Capital Region was not outdone. While the political choice to be directly involved in the commemorative events was made later there than in the other main regions and communities, it demonstrated its will and capacity to implement different activities aimed at reaching a wide public while taking the specific nature of the Region into account.
- 77 The chances are high that the mobilisation involved in these commemorative events will result in going beyond the traditional and very conventional annual ceremonies to favour more *modern* activities which are likely to interest a larger part of the population. It is not unlikely that, following this centenary, we shall witness a certain reappropriation of commemorative events by the general public, as well as part of their history.
- 78 This brief overview has shown that in Belgium, and particularly in Brussels, the public have demonstrated a new interest in history, as well as in the knowledge of their local past: a true *historical appetite* which only needs to be fed by a presentation allowing a direct and original dialogue between researchers and the general public. Like the transformation of educational techniques, the period of simple presentations of the past seems to have given way gradually to a new model of interaction, with all citizens transformed into *stakeholders of their past* provided that the process is well supported. This trend provides interesting opportunities for historians, who are invited to enter into dialogue with new stakeholders in need of their expertise. They come from many different backgrounds, as we have underlined the extreme diversity of events created in the framework of the centenary. All of this therefore raises the question as to the societal role of the historian, which has become the subject of many debates.
- 79 Overall, the theme of the majority of events in Brussels studied here wavered between two main lines: the daily life of the inhabitants of Brussels and the global history of the conflict in its Belgian dimension. But we have underlined that these approaches were used very often to prompt debates and reflection on current issues as diverse as the reception of refugees, daily life in an occupied country, the image of homosexuality, etc. In certain ways, we might even say that it is not so much the past as an object of knowledge which was on the agenda for the centenary, but the presentation of certain values which make sense in today's society: the defence of freedom, solidarity, democracy, social cohesion, etc. These themes were approached through the experiences of civilians and soldiers from all origins who were on Belgian soil and in particular in the capital. The approach to the past has often been used as a tool for cohesion and as a lever for integration. It is a past which concerns everybody: the inhabitants of Brussels from

here and elsewhere, history enthusiasts, lovers of historical memory tourism, non-natives, expatriates, tourists for a day, etc.

- 80 Finally, let us note that while the emergence of the Brussels-Capital Region as a full stakeholder of historical memory was one of the main consequences of these commemorative events, it does not erase the presence of other stakeholders in its territory, whether it is the federal or federated authorities of the Belgian state, municipal authorities or stakeholders from civil society. In Brussels, the commemoration has often been a *shared commemoration*, which has also been *competitive* at times.

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## NOTES

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  3. See [Bost-Kesteloot, 2014: 23-24] and the debate in Vlaams Parlement on 16 November 2011: VLAAMS PARLEMENT, 2011. Plenaire vergadering, woensdag 16 november 2011, 14.00u. 16/11/2011. Brussels. Available at: <https://www.vlaamsparlement.be/plenaire-vergaderingen/645838/verslag/648898/persoon/johan-verstreken>
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  6. Ibidem
  7. N.C., 2014. Centenaire de la Guerre 14-18 : la Région soutiendra 130 projets. Press release by Rudi Vervoort. In: Rudi Vervoort [online]. 27/02/2014. [Retrieved on 08/2017] Available at: <http://rudivervoort.be/MP/?p=1563>
- Of the 131 projects chosen, four were withdrawn by their organisers, which meant that 127 projects in total could benefit from financing. At the time of publication of this text, some of them had not been carried out yet, as they were allowed to take place in the period between the beginning of 2014 and the end of 2018.
8. Only the "private" organisations are included here. The museums and cultural institutions under the municipal, federal or regional authorities were classified in these respective categories.
  9. OFFENSTADT, Nicolas, n.c. L'Observatoire du Centenaire. In: Université Paris I. Panthéon-Sorbonne [online]. [Retrieved on 08/2017] Available at: <http://www.univ-paris1.fr/autres-structures-de-recherche/lobservatoire-du-centenaire/>
  10. All of the events considered in the analysis deal with World War I directly or indirectly. When the Great War was simply the background for an event, it was also included. When the same event took place several times on different dates or at different addresses (such as a travelling exhibit), it was counted as many times as the periods and addresses appeared in our research. However, the publications and articles in the press were not included in the list.

11. Let us note that among them there are certain travelling exhibits for which we counted each new presentation, as mentioned above.
12. The following lines constitute a revised version of part of the article by BENVINDO, Bruno and VANRAEPENBUSCH, Karla, 2016. Des commémorations sous influence? Exposer la Grande Guerre à Bruxelles. In: Mémoires en jeu. Revue critique interdisciplinaire et multiculturelle sur les enjeux de mémoire. 12/2016. No 2, pp. 102-110.
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14. Available at: [http://bx1.be/type\\_emissions/021-avenue-de-lyser/](http://bx1.be/type_emissions/021-avenue-de-lyser/)
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17. WTNSCHP/EXPERTISECENTRUM WETENSCHAPCOMMUNICATIE BRUSSEL, n.c. Urban game – wetenschap in de stad. Fiche – Brussels at war. In: wtnschp [online]. [Retrieved on 08/2017] Available at: <https://www.wtnschp.be/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Fiche-Brussels-at-war.pdf>
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19. VISIT.BRUSSELS, n.c. 2014-18.brussels [online]. [Retrieved on 08/2017] Available at: <https://visit.brussels/fr/lists/2014-18>
20. BRUXELLES 14-18, Paul Max 1914-1918 [online]. Facebook page. [Retrieved on 08/2017] Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/paulmax19141918/>
21. VILLE DE BRUXELLES, n.c. Bruxelles occupée 14-18 [online]. [Retrieved on 08/2017] Available at: <http://www.14-18.bruxelles.be/index.php/>
22. The list does not include any explanations. On reading it, it is clear that these are people who died during the conflict, but contrary to what the heading suggests, these are not only soldiers and inhabitants from the municipality of Brussels (it includes, for example, the member of the Resistance from Schaerbeek, Philippe Baucq, born in Brussels).
23. IN FLANDERS FIELDS MUSEUM, n.c. Liste des noms. In: In flanders fields Museum [online]. [Retrieved on 08/2017] Available at: <http://www.inflandersfields.be/fr/listedesnoms/recherche>
24. INSTITUT DES VETERANS, n.c. Belgian War Dead Register [online]. [Retrieved on 08/2017] Available at: <https://www.wardeadregister.be/fr>
25. BIBLIOTHEQUES DE L'ULB, 2014. 1914 – ULB – 1918 [online]. [Retrieved on 08/2017] Available at: <http://1914-ulb-1918.blogspot.be/>
26. Today (August 2017), the address <http://www.shock1914.be/> leads to a curious website which advertises credit cards and energy providers, whereas the address [www.expo14-18.be](http://www.expo14-18.be) (retrieved in August 2017) brings visitors to a heating and air conditioning company.
27. For the Flemish Community:  
VLAAMSE OVERHEID, 2014. Agenda. In: 2014-18. 100 jaar Groote Oorlog [online]. [Retrieved on 08/2017] Available at: <http://www.2014-18.be/agenda/search>  
and VLAANDEREN VERBEELDING WERKT, n.c. Agenda. In: Uit in Vlaanderen [online]. [Retrieved on 08/2017] Available at: <https://www.uitinvlaanderen.be/agenda/search>  
For Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles:  
FEDERATION WALLONIE-BRUXELLES, n.c. Agenda des événements. In: Commémorer 14-18 [online]. [Retrieved on 08/2017] Available at: <http://www.commemorer14-18.be/index.php?id=10992>

**28.** COMITE D'ORGANISATION FEDERAL. Agenda. In: Commémoration de la Première Guerre mondiale en Belgique [online]. [Retrieved on 08/2017] Available at: <http://www.be14-18.be/fr/ev%C3%A8nements/agenda>

**29.** N.C., 2015. Bon cadeau 20 minutes. In: Berchem News, 02/2015, No 127, p.6

**30.** Idem

**31.** Not only was it difficult to count them with precision while distinguishing those which dealt specifically with Brussels, it was usually difficult to determine the exact date of their publication and to locate them in the Region.

**32.** These questions were of course echoed in the press. See for example: LALLEMAND, Alain, 2014. Expo 14-18 et Frontbeweging: un De Wever peut en désamorcer un autre. In: Le Soir. 04/04/2014.

**33.** They were asked to answer a questionnaire at three measurement times: 15 days before visiting the exhibit (J-15), at the end of their visit (J), and 15 days later (J+15). The questionnaire was given in the language of education of the participants. Only the results for part of the questions are used here. The first section of the questionnaire was aimed at measuring the level of historical and current victimisation perceived via the following questions: "During World War I, my country suffered due to the behaviour of enemy countries" (= historical victimisation) and "My country still suffers today due to the behaviour of enemy countries during World War I" (= current victimisation). These questions were measured using a 7-point scale, whereby 1 = not at all and 7 = very strongly. The second section of the questionnaire was made up of demographic questions.

**34.** As regards "historical victimisation", the French speakers had an average score of 5.55 and the Dutch speakers, 5.77, on a scale of 1 to 7. The feeling of "current victimisation" was much lower, with an average of 2.23 for the French speakers and 2.72 for the Dutch speakers.

## ABSTRACTS

The centenary of World War I has marked an abrupt change: historical events will never be commemorated in the same way, especially in Belgium. The federated entities have demonstrated the autonomous role which they intend to play in future events of this type. The Brussels-Capital Region was not outdone. While the political choice to be directly involved in the commemorative events was made later there than in the other main regions and communities, it demonstrated its will and capacity to implement different activities aimed at reaching a very wide public. The systematic study of just over 430 activities identified between January 2014 and June 2017 in the territory of the Brussels-Capital Region thus highlights their extreme diversity as well as the exceptional dynamism of the municipalities which were at the origin of one quarter of them. Overall, the theme of the majority of events studied wavered between two main lines: the daily life of the inhabitants of Brussels and the global history of the conflict in its Belgian dimension. But these approaches were also used to prompt debates and reflection on current issues which make sense in today's society: the defence of freedom, solidarity, democracy, social cohesion, etc. The historical approach was therefore used as a tool for cohesion and as a lever for integration, with a past which concerns everybody: the inhabitants of Brussels from here and elsewhere, history enthusiasts, lovers of historical memory tourism, non-natives, expatriates, tourists for a day, etc.



Le Centenaire de la Première Guerre mondiale marque une rupture : on ne commémorera plus jamais de la même manière les événements historiques, tout particulièrement en Belgique. Les entités fédérées y ont démontré le rôle qu'elles entendaient désormais jouer, en toute autonomie, dans de futurs événements de ce type. La Région de Bruxelles-capitale n'a pas été en reste. Si le choix politique de s'impliquer directement dans les commémorations y fut postérieur à celui des autres grandes régions et communautés, elle a démontré sa volonté et sa capacité à mettre en place une politique volontariste et ambitieuse visant à toucher un très large public. L'étude systématique d'un peu plus de 430 activités recensées entre janvier 2014 et juin 2017 sur le territoire de la Région de Bruxelles-capitale met ainsi en exergue leur extrême diversité mais aussi l'exceptionnel dynamisme des communes bruxelloises qui ont été à l'initiative d'un quart d'entre eux. Globalement, la thématique de la majorité des événements étudiés oscilla entre deux axes: le quotidien des Bruxellois et l'histoire globale du conflit dans sa dimension belge mais ces approches furent aussi utilisées pour susciter débats et réflexions sur des questions d'actualité, pour présenter certaines valeurs qui font sens pour la société actuelle : la défense de la liberté, la solidarité, la démocratie, la cohésion sociale... L'approche historique a donc été utilisée comme outil de cohésion et levier d'intégration à travers un passé qui s'adressait à tous : les Bruxellois d'ici et d'ailleurs, les passionnés d'histoire, les amateurs de tourisme de mémoire, les allochtones, les expatriés, les touristes d'un jour...

De viering van de honderdste verjaardag van de Eerste Wereldoorlog betekent een breuk: historische gebeurtenissen zullen nooit meer op dezelfde manier worden herdacht, zeker niet in België. De deelgebieden hebben duidelijk laten verstaan welke rol ze voortaan volledig autonoom wensen te spelen bij toekomstige evenementen van dat type. Het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest is daarbij niet achtergebleven. Het besliste weliswaar later dan de andere grote gewesten en gemeenschappen om de herdenkingen zelf te organiseren, maar toonde aan dat het bereid en in staat is om een krachtadig en ambitieus herdenkingsbeleid op poten te zetten dat tot een zeer ruim publiek gericht is. Een systematisch onderzoek van iets meer dan 430 activiteiten die tussen januari 2014 en juni 2017 werden geregistreerd op het grondgebied van het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest, wijst op hun extreme diversiteit, maar ook op de uitzonderlijke dynamiek van de Brusselse gemeenten die het initiatief hebben genomen voor een kwart van de activiteiten. In het algemeen werden in het merendeel van de evenementen twee thematische benaderingen gevolgd: het dagelijkse leven van de Brusselaars en de algemene geschiedenis van het conflict in zijn Belgische dimensie, maar die benaderingen werden ook gevolgd om debatten en reflecties over actuele vraagstukken op gang te brengen en om bepaalde waarden te presenteren die van betekenis zijn voor de hedendaagse samenleving: verdediging van de vrijheid, solidariteit, democratie, sociale cohesie... De historische benadering werd dus vaak gebruikt als instrument van cohesie en als hefboom voor integratie via een verleden dat zich tot iedereen richt: de Brusselaars van hier en elders, de gepassioneerden van geschiedenis, de liefhebbers van herdenkingstoerisme, de allochtonen, de expats, de dagjestoeristen...

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**Mots-clés:** histoire, culture, Première Guerre mondiale

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